

# Leadership Journey of Women In Waterloo Region

In September 2022, Capacity Canada assembled a team of women from several nonprofit organizations in Waterloo Region to gather stories from women<sup>[1]</sup> in the community who are too often underrepresented in the decision-making roles in the nonprofit sector. Each of the self-identifying women who shared their stories with us possessed multiple diversity characteristics that when combined create overlapping modes of discrimination and marginalization. The diversity characteristics of the 13 women we spoke to included: racialized, newcomer, low-income, youth, disabled, indigenous, two-spirit, lesbian and queer.

We learned about their perspectives on leadership and the nonprofit sector and about the challenges they face in finding roles that reflect their skills and experience. This journey map shares what we learned from these stories.

<sup>1</sup> We are using an inclusive definition of women that recognizes trans women, queer women and non-binary people



*What do women, two-spirit and gender diverse individuals from underrepresented communities in Waterloo Region need in order to increase their participation in leadership within the non-profit sector?*



# Attraction

What women need in order to pursue career and governance opportunities in the sector:

- Seeing others like them in decision-making roles within the organization
- Is it a social cause they care about?
- Opportunities for career development and growth of professional skills
- Role flexibility - ways to make work happen around life
- Competitive wage & benefits
- Organization demonstrates commitment to decision-making that is inclusive and transparent



"As a newcomer, the nonprofit sector isn't sold as work/career path it's more of places to get help."

"I was rejected by many organizations because of my disability. They didn't see what was in my brain."

"As a young person, you don't get a voice on your way up, but you have to work several jobs to make ends meet and pay for things. You should get a chance to be heard and provide input - your input is valuable."

Money & privilege are often precondition for board roles

Caregiving responsibilities mean only a part time role is possible

Colonial structures & hierarchy acts as a deterrent

Lack of confidence and imposter syndrome

Some organizations seem to value education over lived experience

- Safe spaces to try new things, innovate and sometimes fail
- Mentors & coaches to support development & learning
- Organization commits to deconstructing the unique barriers women and gender diverse people face in progressing in their careers
- They are seen as a whole, capable and dynamic person with many skills and abilities to contribute.



"Without resources and support, entering a leadership position as an immigrant woman of colour can be a glass slope to failure."

"Humanize, not mechanize; make space for things to play out at the board table."

"If anyone who wants to lead is racialized or more intersectional than I am, I will offer to stand down."

# Advocacy

What leaders can do to increase participation of underrepresented women in the nonprofit sector:

- Prioritize mentoring and talent development of new & emerging leaders from underrepresented groups
- Commit to regular unlearning to make space for new leadership practices and approaches
- Enact policy changes that reflect an inclusive approach to governance, HR, communications, recruiting, evaluation etc.
- Share both the challenges & successes of their leadership journey
- Organizations ongoingly invest resources to create more equitable opportunities for prospective board members, staff and volunteers



"Leadership has a lot of different functions whether in an organization or an unstructured community. Leadership can happen in smaller contexts."

"Leadership is personal, individual, values based."

"I faced leadership challenges from my own community in addition to the mainstream. The jealousy factor is a big one. Being a woman is another one."

# Activation

What women need in order to thrive in career and governance opportunities in the sector:

Rigid ideas of how leaders should be

Person is seen as representing their culture or identity, not for their skills and abilities

Young leaders not seen for their leadership qualities

Lack of professional development for part-time roles

Leaders can get stuck in what has worked in the past

Leaders don't always make space for others unlike them

Lack of knowledge, understanding and empathy

# Insights



## Calls to Action

- Ongoing learning for all boards and organizational leadership on important social justice topics such as DEI, anti-racism, anti-oppression, and truth & reconciliation
- Programs to support the participation of underrepresented women at all stages of their leadership journey
- Leadership skill building participation opportunities for youth
- Policies that support benchmarking team and board composition, with agreed upon goals & targets
- Organizations share their successes in this area and where they can learn to do better
- Innovative partnerships, allyship and pilot projects that look at different ways of thinking, new structures & systems

## New Questions

- How might we reinvent leadership so that women, two-spirit and gender diverse individuals feel they belong and are welcomed?
- How might sector organizations align their internal environments to be places where people with a range of diversity characteristics can lead and thrive?

## Promising Practices

- Feminist Frameworks
- Shared Leadership Models
- Peer Networks
- Training & Mentorship for underrepresented women
- Examples of other forms of leadership & governance internationally